

# TOMORROW'S VOICE

## FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

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## IMPORTANT

Please note this report contains the views and opinions of only a small sample of young people in Wiltshire. These views cannot be taken to reflect that of the general younger population in the County.

## 1. Introduction

Tomorrow's Voice, Wiltshire's method for consulting young people, was set up in 1999, in partnership with the County Council, the district councils, Police and the primary care trusts (PCTs). Using postal questionnaires, young people across the County have been surveyed over the years about issues ranging from leisure and recreation to crime and anti-social behaviour. The results of the surveys have been invaluable to both public and voluntary organisations in Wiltshire that work with young people, enabling them to make informed decisions about their services.

Each Tomorrow's Voice survey questionnaire has primarily consisted of a number of 'closed' questions; questions with standardised responses. Closed questions are most commonly used in postal surveys as they provide a relatively quick and cost effective way of quantifying and identifying trends in behaviour, satisfaction and awareness using a relatively large sample of the population of interest. However, while it is important to identify trends, it is also just as important to uncover and understand the reasons *why* participants think or behave as they do.

On this particular occasion, Tomorrow's Voice has taken a different approach to consulting young people in Wiltshire. As a one-off exercise, the regular postal survey has been substituted with focus groups in order to identify and understand the responses given by young people to questions asked in previous surveys. Focus groups are generally used to *explore*, in depth, people's views and experiences on a specific set of issues. They are highly useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think but they also help uncover *why* participants think as they do. The aim of this exercise is to try to go beyond describing what young people in Wiltshire think and focus on explaining the reasons behind their views.

In October 2004, key contacts at the County Council, the district councils, Police and the PCTs were invited to a Tomorrow's Voice workshop to discuss potential topics from previous surveys which they would like to explore in more depth. The topics identified in the workshop included:

- Local councils
- The fear of crime and anti-social behaviour
- Local parks, leisure and recreation
- Connexions and careers support in school
- Education: academic Vs vocational
- Smoking, drug use and underage alcohol consumption
- Healthy eating
- Internet safety
- Libraries

Using these topics as the basis for discussion, a series of focus groups were conducted with young people across Wiltshire. The focus groups were semi-structured discussions which enabled a degree of standardisation and ensured that chosen topics were discussed across all groups, yet it allowed the participants to form their own responses

and discuss various aspects of a given topic that was of importance to them. This report contains the findings obtained from the discussions.

## 2. Participant Profile

A total of four focus groups were conducted with young people across Wiltshire. Two focus groups were conducted with secondary school pupils, one was conducted with a group of sixth formers and a further focus group was conducted at a Wiltshire youth centre. The participating schools were asked to select, at random, six to eight pupils from a mixed-ability class, in a particular school year, to take part in the focus group. Similarly, the participating sixth form was asked to invite a group of six to eight young people to the focus group. It was not, however, possible to restrict the number of participants and the age of participants at the youth centre. The set-up of the venue meant anyone wishing to participate was able to do so, but it also meant that new people joined the discussion half way through while others excused themselves. The table below provides a profile of the focus group participants.

	<b>Total participants</b>	<b>Males participants</b>	<b>Female participants</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Year Group</b>
<b>School 1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12-13 years</b>	<b>Year 8</b>
<b>School 2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14-15 years</b>	<b>Year 10</b>
<b>Sixth form</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16-17 years</b>	<b>Year 12</b>
<b>Youth Centre</b>	<b>Approx 16</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>13-17 years</b>	<b>Mixed</b>

Throughout the group discussions, notes were made on a flip chart by the facilitator for the purpose of analysis. An added advantage of this was that both the participants and facilitator were able to clarify and agree that the issues raised in the discussions were being interpreted and recorded correctly.

## 3. Findings Obtained from the Focus Group Discussions

For the purpose of this report, the findings obtained from the focus group discussions are categorised under the same topics identified in the workshop. However, there are a number of topics that include cross-cutting issues throughout the following categories.

### 3.1 Local Councils and Decision Making

This topic proved to generate some very interesting discussions across the focus groups. Participants at the schools and the youth centre initially expressed very little interest at the mention of local councils. The majority of participants, particularly those at the youth centre, felt that the operation and the responsibilities of the councils, in general, were not a concern for young people. Councils were commonly associated with older

people; many of the participants held the view that the councils had nothing to do with them and thought that it was a 'boring' topic to be discussing.

The discussion moved onto the possible reasons why there was so much disinterest among young people. It became quite clear that the majority of the participants had very little knowledge about the role and responsibilities of the councils. The older participants, at the sixth form and a couple at the youth centre, were aware that there were different councils with different responsibilities, but were not aware of the specific areas for which each council is responsible. Among the younger participants, at the schools, all but two claimed they were not aware of the different types of councils; both of these participants said they knew there were different councils because they had parents who were employed by one of the district councils or the County Council.

Throughout the focus group discussions, it was clear that many participants associated the word 'council' with their local town council, rather than the district councils or the County Council. Participants were more familiar with their local town council as the buildings are often prime features within their local town centres. While the majority of participants initially associated councils with older people, as the conversation progressed it transpired that they also associated councils (town councils) with skateboard parks. All participants at the schools, sixth form and youth centre said they had heard about their local town council being involved in setting up a skateboard park in their local area.

The topic of town councils and skateboard parks lead participants to talk about decision making and opportunities to be involved. A couple of participants at one school recalled seeing leaflets and posters inviting them to an event for young people to talk about the possibility of creating a new skateboard park in their local area. However, at another school, participants expressed a lot of frustration towards their local town council. They explained that their skateboard park had been closed down by the council due to complaints about the level of noise by local residents. The participants thought that the council's decision was unfair as young people did not have a say in the matter. Participants in this group were asked whether they would have liked to have been involved in the decision making process and the collective response was that they would liked to have been given an opportunity to express their views. This response was at odds with the views expressed by almost all participants at the beginning of the discussion about councils. Initial responses conveyed the message that the role and responsibilities of councils were not of a concern to young people.

Once participants acknowledged that many of the leisure and recreational facilities, including youth centres, tended to be set up and maintained by local councils, many participants expressed a desire to be involved in the councils' decision making processes. There was a consensus among the participants, of all ages, that they did not know how to express their opinions about issues of concern to the councils. The group of sixth formers suggested that a system of communication needs to be developed whereby they can influence the decision making process. When asked how this could potentially be achieved, they suggested the councils should have representatives who speak with young people on a regular basis and feed back the information to people who make the decisions. Similar ideas were shared by participants in schools and the

youth centre. The participants across all four focus groups also felt it is very important that communication with the councils is a two way process; as well as expressing their own views, a number of participants wanted to be kept informed on a regular basis about the services and facilities that young people use.

A number of participants thought the set up of the focus group discussion was an ideal way of communicating their views and being kept informed about the councils' plans and decisions. The participants in the two school groups felt that such discussions should be incorporated into lesson time rather than during school lunchtimes or after school. Participants at one school, thought that letters, personally addressed to pupils, describing changes and the councils' plans would be a useful way of communicating and keeping young people informed. However, posters and leaflets were not viewed as an effective channel of communication as 'we don't bother reading them' (also see section 3.6 'Smoking, Drug Use and Underage Alcohol Consumption').

### **3.2 The Fear of Crime and Anti-social Behaviour**

This topic generated a great amount of interest within all four focus group discussions. Previous Tomorrow's Voice results have suggested a high proportion of young people, particularly females, felt unsafe in their local area after dark, but it hasn't been possible to identify why they felt unsafe or what it is they feared.

Participants were asked to describe situations where they would feel afraid. The most common responses given by female participants, of all ages, was walking home after dark in their local area. Although the participants had not experienced anything bad themselves, many described incidents in their local area that they had heard of or read about. The incidents described included muggings and physical and sexual assaults. Female participants, generally, were afraid that they may become victims of these crimes if they walked home alone after dark so they would arrange to walk with a group of friends or ask their parents to pick them up. When asked if they felt their local area has become safer or less safe over the years, younger female participants felt that their local area had become less safe. Older female participants at the sixth form, however, explained that although they felt their local area had become less safe, this may be due to the fact that they have become more aware of crime as they have got older rather than an actual increase of crime in the local area.

Responses from male participants, however, varied. The participants at one school, who were aged between 12 and 13, said they did feel 'a bit scared' when out in their local area after dark and talked about incidents of physical assault and muggings that they'd heard of in their local area, many of which seemed to be motivated by mobile phones. Male participants at another school, aged between 14 and 15 said they felt their local area has become less safe in recent years. However, this did not prevent them from going out in their local area after dark. Older male participants (the sixth formers and a number of participants at the youth centre) said they did not feel afraid when outside in their local area after dark, however, they said they can understand why people would feel afraid. They explained that there are often groups of young people that congregate in parks or town centres which many people may find intimidating. The female

participants in this group agreed that they felt intimidated when walking past large groups of young people. Participants in the younger age groups, at the schools, also identified this issue and said that it was one of the reasons why they felt unsafe when outside in their local area after dark. However, the female participants at the sixth form and the female participants in Year 8 agreed that this was not just a problem after dark. They talked about how they even felt intimidated during the day when they walked past large groups of young people in the park (see also 3.3 Local Parks and Leisure/Recreation Opportunities). When participants were asked why they felt intimidated by groups of youths, it emerged that they associated groups of young people with anti-social behaviour and activities, such as drinking, smoking and making a lot of noise.

The suggestion of community wardens patrolling local streets, town centres and parks to help make people feel safer in their local area was received with mixed views. While younger participants at one school and some at the youth centre, thought this could be an effective way of making people feel safer, many of the sixth form participants discussed reasons why such a scheme would fail. They explained that community wardens do not have any 'real powers' to take action against anti-social behaviour. Male participants at this group felt that young people, particularly those who engage in anti-social activities, have no respect for wardens. Female participants in this group also discussed how they had heard that there will be more police patrolling local areas, but they have not actually seen any in their local area yet. All participants in this focus group were very sceptical of both increased police patrols and community warden schemes.

### **3.3 Local Parks, Leisure and Recreation**

Discussions about feeling intimidated by groups of youths congregating in town centres and parks lead participants at the schools to talk about the lack of leisure and social activities in the local area. Year 8 participants felt that young people hang around in groups in the parks and in town centres because there is nothing else for them to do. They felt that the problem of young groups of people intimidating members of the public and behaving in an anti-social manner can be resolved if there was 'somewhere for them to go'. A number of participants at the schools and the youth centre explained that a lot of the activities are too expensive for them and some identified transport difficulties as a barrier preventing them from taking part in regular social and leisure activities. One group said that although their local area had a cinema, they would often have to travel out of town to watch new film releases as their local cinema does not show up-to-date releases. Year 10 participants highlighted the issue of how they would like to have somewhere to go out on a Friday night but there is very little in their local area for young people in the evenings. They explained how young people are not allowed in certain places after a certain time, such as the snooker club.

When participants at the sixth form were asked whether increasing affordable activities for young people would resolve the issue of youths congregating in town centres, they thought this was just one part of the solution. This group felt that no matter what facilities and activities are set up for young people, they will not appeal to the young

people who congregate in parks and town centres. The sixth formers explained that many young people do not attend social activities that are set up for young people because alcohol consumption and smoking is prohibited at these places. There were mixed responses from participants at the youth centre; while some felt that young people needed more exciting activities to keep them occupied, others said 'there's always going to be people who just want to go out and drink and smoke'.

During discussions about the local parks, many of the younger participants at one school thought the local park was 'OK', but they discussed how there was very little for young people their age at the park. They felt too old to use any of the equipment at the park and a couple of participants described larger parks that they had visited in other parts of the country, which had a lot more to offer, such as ramps for biking and skating. The other focus group with school pupils generated discussions about the local council's decision to close the local skateboard park (see section 3.1, 'Local councils and decision making'). Young people in this group also felt that there was nothing to do for people their age at the local park now that their skateboard park has been taken away. The older male participants (sixth form participants and some participants at the youth centre) said they rarely used their local park; it was mainly in the summer that they went there with friends to play football. Older female participants also indicated that they rarely used local parks.

Participants were asked if they thought their local park was well kept. The general response was that the parks were free of litter and refuse, although many of the younger participants, and some older participants, commented on recurring vandalism of play equipment in their local park. Younger participants at one school expressed concern about this issue, talking about how the equipment at their park is repeatedly vandalised and gets sprayed with graffiti by older youths, even after it has been repaired and repainted. Again a couple of participants at this focus group, suggested that 'park wardens' may be a solution to this problem. They explained how such schemes were in operation in other parts of the country and they felt that it is likely to make people feel safer in the park as well as ensure that older youths behave themselves and do not vandalise equipment. Again, older participants remained relatively sceptical, saying that certain groups of young people enjoy destroying things 'for a laugh' and will continue to destroy equipment no matter what measures are taken to combat the problem.

### **3.4 Careers Support in Schools**

The topic of careers advice and support in schools did not generate too much discussion among participants as many of the participants had not yet thought about what they wanted to do in terms of work. Many of the younger participants at the schools acknowledged the Connexions service at their school as a place to obtain information about different types of careers, although most participants felt they were not ready or 'too young' to start thinking about careers. In terms of knowing where to access information, all participants at the schools and sixth form knew of members of staff that are able to help, but few had chosen to access information on careers to date. The sixth formers explained that they had been focusing more on university applications rather than career and employment information (see section 3.5 'Education: Academic

Vs Vocational'). They explained how accessing such information was usually up to the individual.

When these participants were asked whether they thought careers support and guidance should be incorporated into mandatory lesson time, some participants felt that this may encourage young people to start thinking about what they would like to do in the future, helping them to choose the subjects they need for the careers they want. Sixth form participants also agreed, adding that it may even help introduce young people to a variety of potential career paths which they may not have previously envisaged. They discussed how they had previously taken part in exercises at school to identify jobs to which they would be suited based on the information they provided about their personal characteristics. Participants found the results of these exercises very interesting and, in some cases, amusing and thought it generated interest to find out more about different careers.

### **3.5 Education: Academic Vs Vocational**

As with the discussions around careers advice and support, this topic also failed to generate a lengthy discussion with participants. Except for the sixth formers, all other participants felt they did not have enough knowledge about courses, both academic and vocational, and neither had they tried to access information about them. Participants at the schools and the youth centre were asked whether they thought it was important to acquire a university degree in order to secure a 'good' job. The general response was that university degrees were vital for securing a well paid and reputable job. The majority of school participants said they themselves expect to go to university when they are old enough.

Discussion with sixth form participants identified similar attitudes towards university degrees. However, they also acknowledged that while university degrees are important for their future work life, there is a general expectation for young people to go to university after they have completed their post 16 education. They described it as the norm in their sixth form, with almost everyone they know in the process of applying for university places. Some of the female sixth formers felt that if they didn't go to university they would feel that they have underachieved. Through discussion, it transpired that there was a lot of support, advice and encouragement for sixth formers to help them apply for university places.

Participants did however feel that information about courses other than academic courses should be made more accessible to young people. Participants thought that by informing young people about alternative courses, their choice of options will be widened.

### 3.6 Smoking, Drug Use and Underage Alcohol Consumption

These topics generated a great deal of interest among all participants. At the mention of the word 'smoking', many participants started discussing the 'quit smoking' campaigns that they had seen on television. When asked about whether these campaigns help to encourage people to give up smoking and prevent new smokers from taking up the habit, there were mixed views about this. While many thought that the campaigns were effective in helping people to quit smoking, there were a number of participants who said that the impact of the television advertisement was short-lived. They explained that the initial impact of the campaigns is lost over time as people get used to seeing them. For one particular campaign where a slimy substance was shown to pour out of cigarettes, participants said they thought it was disgusting. Some participants in Year 10 said they change the channel when the advertisement is aired as it makes them feel 'sick'. Rather than focusing on the message that the campaign was trying to convey, many participants seemed to focus more on the slimy substance shown.

Younger participants at the youth centre talked about one campaign in particular where a lung cancer patient is shown having difficulty breathing and the campaign ends with some information about how the patient died following the filming of the campaign. The participants did not believe that the patient had died, but thought that the 'quit smoking' campaign said that just to encourage people to quit smoking. Some of the older participants in this group thought that the campaigns exaggerate the health risks associated with smoking and that is why they do not take too much notice of them. They explained that the introduction of 'smoking kills' messages on cigarette packets did not stop people smoking. They discussed how all smokers are already aware of the health risks associated with smoking but they choose to ignore them. However, young participants at one school felt that the printed messages do have an impact and are likely to deter people from taking up smoking.

Participants were asked about their views on the Government smoking ban in public places. Again, there were mixed views about this, with some participants saying it would be an effective way of discouraging people from smoking as well as protecting non-smokers from the effects of passive smoking. Others felt that smokers would just find somewhere else to smoke instead of giving up smoking. While participants were divided in terms of whether the ban will reduce the number of smokers, almost all participants agreed that the enforcement of the ban is needed to protect the health of non-smokers.

During discussions about under age drinking, it transpired that participants did not see this as a problem. While Year 8 participants in one focus group recognised that it was illegal, they accepted, as did all other participants, that under age alcohol consumption is common and always has been. It was not regarded as a new issue and many participants, particularly those at the youth centre, did not see any harm in it. Even though in earlier discussions participants identified drinking as one of the anti-social activities that youths engage in when they congregate in parks and town centres, a number of participants at the youth centre and some of the Year 10 participants argued that underage drinking poses no serious threat. Underage drinking was almost regarded as acceptable - 'everyone does it'.

When asked about possible ways of dealing with underage drinking, all focus group participants agreed that this would be difficult. Many identified that ID schemes do not work as young people often ask older teenagers, such as older friends and siblings, to purchase the alcohol for them. A couple of Year 8 participants suggested that alcohol should not be sold in newsagents and other small retail outlets, but should only be made available at proper off licences. They felt this would reduce the potential for young people to buy alcohol as they are less likely to hang around outside an off licence in case of being caught. However, these participants also acknowledge that this was highly unlikely to happen as small retail outlets would make a loss in profit by doing so.

While both smoking and underage alcohol consumption was almost thought of as 'acceptable', drug use was not. Many participants thought the health risks associated with drug use were greater than that for cigarettes and alcohol and some even acknowledged the association between drug use and criminal behaviour.

Discussions about alcohol, smoking and drugs raised the issue of accessing information and advice on prevention. Participants were asked whether they had been given information or if they had received talks at school about problems associated with smoking, drugs and alcohol. A number of participants across the groups recalled activities within their school to raise awareness of the problems, which ranged from designing anti-smoking posters to learning about the health risks in science classes. When asked about the effectiveness of informing young people, in a school setting, about these risks, it was generally felt that young people will drink, smoke or use drugs if they want to, despite being warned of the dangers. With regard to drug use, participants in all four focus groups shared the belief that teachers learn about the risks from books, therefore, do not have any real knowledge of the effects of drugs. Participants at the youth centre felt that they knew more about the different types of drugs and their effects than some of the teachers who taught them about the dangers of drugs. The Year 8 and Year 10 participants felt that the schools were only interested in getting the message through to young people that 'drugs are bad for you', instead of informing young people properly about the different types of drugs. Many participants believed that the more young people are told not to do something, the more likely they are to do it.

Participants were asked if printed leaflets were a useful way of informing young people about the issues surrounding drugs, alcohol and smoking. The majority of participants across the focus groups said they rarely read such leaflets and some even said they find them a little patronising. Again a couple of participants at the youth centre described how such leaflets 'always tell you to say no', instead of giving the real facts and letting young people make up their own mind. When participants were asked what they thought was the most effective way of raising awareness and educating young people about the dangers of drugs, alcohol and smoking, the vast majority felt that specially qualified people, instead of teachers, should come into schools to give a talk to young people. Others suggested that talks provided by ex drug addicts, alcoholics and smokers would help young people to take notice as the experiences of such people would be real.

### **3.7 Healthy Eating**

This topic immediately generated discussion in all focus groups about the issue of obesity. There was awareness among participants that obesity is now a serious problem among the general British population. Many talked about the increasing media coverage of this issue, which ranged from a programme on television called 'Fat Nation' to McDonald's advertisement campaigns for its new range of salads. When participants were asked what they thought of the nationwide attempt to reduce obesity, a mixed range of responses was obtained.

Many participants identified that healthy food was relatively expensive compared the non-healthy options available, making it difficult for people to eat healthily, particularly young people. Almost all participants said that healthy foods were not as appealing as some of the non-healthy options, such a burgers and chips. Some explained how they would often bypass the healthy options available at their school canteen and opt for the 'regular' dishes as they were cheaper and looked more appetising. Another difficulty identified by participants, with regard to their school canteen, was that the options for healthy food was usually limited to one or two items on the menu while the options for non-healthy food was extensive. A number of participants at the sixth form and in Year 8 said school canteens can encourage pupils to eat a balanced diet by offering more choice in terms of healthy options.

Whilst discussing eating out and fast food chains, similar barriers to eating healthily were mentioned. Year 10 participants identified that while McDonalds advertise healthy alternatives, once inside the restaurant, customers are easily tempted to buy the more fatty burgers and fries because they're better value for money and smell 'delicious'. Older participants explained that when they are out late in the evenings, the only food outlets open at these times are the 'junk food' outlets, selling burgers, kebabs and chips.

When participants were asked if they generally watched their diet, all participants, except the female sixth formers and some of the older female participants at the youth centre, said they ate what they liked. The older female participants had a greater awareness of becoming 'fat' and discussed articles they had read in girls' magazines about the need to eat a balanced diet.

### **3.8 Internet Safety**

The topic of Internet safety generated very little discussion among the participants. All participants seemed to be aware of the safety issues surrounding internet use, especially with regard to the use of chatrooms. However, there was a conception among many participants that the risks associated with internet chatrooms are not as high as walking home alone after dark or using drugs. Participants in all focus groups agreed that while young people are continually told about the dangers, young people will not listen. Participants, although aware of the dangers, tended to associate them with stories in the national media. Unlike stories about mugging, physical and sexual assault, stories about young people and Internet chatrooms were largely unheard of in the local media.

Many participants also said that they prefer to chat using 'MSN Messenger', which allows them to exercise greater control over who is able to chat to them. Almost all participants said they use this to mainly chat to friends from school. Very few participants visited other types of virtual chatrooms.

### **3.9 Libraries**

Whilst discussing the local libraries, it transpired that few participants use them on a regular basis. Participants explained that they often purchased the books they wanted instead of borrowing them from the local library. A couple of participants said they occasionally used the library to hire out DVDs and CDs, but complained about the cost of doing so and also about the limited range available.

Some of the participants at the youth centre also described the library environment as very restricting. They explained that in the past when they had tried to work on a small group project at the library, they were asked to leave by library staff because they were not meant to be talking.

Participants were asked about how they tend to find out information for homework and whether they used the library for reference books or for access to the internet. Almost all participants said they obtain information mainly from the internet, but they often accessed the internet at home. Participants in Year 8 also added that while there are some PCs at their local library, it is often difficult to use one as 'there's always people on them'.

Participants were asked if there was anything that could be done which would make them use the libraries more often. Some suggested that it would be a good idea to provide refreshments, as in Internet cafes, while others felt that designated areas for group work could be set up. However, they also identified the problems these would cause, such as possible spillage on library items or PCs and increased noise.

## **4. Evaluation**

The focus group topics raised some very interesting discussions and helped to explain some of the results of previous Tomorrow's Voice surveys. For example, it appears that one of the main reasons for young people to feel unsafe after dark in their local area was due to feeling intimidated by groups of youths, with whom they associate anti-social behaviour.

The findings from this report will provide the councils, the Police, the PCTs and other agencies in Wiltshire with a better understanding of what young people think and why they think as they do, enabling service providers to plan and deliver their services more effectively.